

ON PAGE 1572

LOS ANGELES TIMES

19 January 1986

Fairness of Vote Vital to Philippines

Poll's Honesty Will Define Nation's Course, U.S. Ties

By MARK FINEMAN,
Times Staff Writer

MANILA—Jaime Opinion, a member of the government commission set up to ensure fairness and honesty in the upcoming Philippine presidential election, sat back in his chair last week and reviewed the list of election safeguards:

—Thirty thousand bottles of indelible, silver-nitrate ink that will be used to stain voters' fingers to prevent them from voting twice.

—Specially watermarked ballots with secret-coded symbols to prevent ballot-box stuffing.

—Tens of thousands of new ballot boxes with viewing windows to allow constant monitoring by independent poll watchers.

Will Vote be Free?

Then, Opinion, a longtime loyalist of Philippine President Ferdinand E. Marcos, was asked if the Feb. 7 election will, indeed, be free, fair and honest.

"Even in heaven, there's a lot of fraud happening," said Opinion, a frequent target of opposition politicians who claim that the Philippine Commission on Elections is little more than a tool of Marcos' ruling party.

With three weeks remaining before a presidential poll that Filipino and foreign political analysts say ranks among the most crucial in this nation's history, the issue of fairness and honesty has emerged as the key to whether the election will help bring democracy, stability and prosperity to the Philippines.

Credibility Essential

"We see an essential need that the election—whatever the outcome—be seen here as being a

credible result," U.S. Ambassador Stephen Bosworth told local and foreign journalists last Monday.

If the result of the contest between Marcos and challenger Corazon Aquino is clean and fair, he said, it will give rise to a stable government that will again attract foreign investment and help the Philippines recover from an economic crisis that has left the nation more than \$26 billion in debt and many Filipinos worse off now than they were 10 years ago.

However, if the poll is seen as unfair or corrupt, Bosworth said, "the quality of the relationship" between the U.S. and the Philippines can only worsen, and the burgeoning Communist insurgency that is now claiming, on the average, 15 lives a day throughout the Philippines can only deepen.

"We are, of course, proceeding on the assumption that the elections can be truly credible," Bosworth added.

Already, though, many Filipinos are not so sure.

While the actual polling is still three weeks away, several Filipino politicians, professors and businessmen say inequities already have been built into the election system that give Marcos an enormous advantage over his rival, the widow of assassinated opposition leader Benigno S. Aquino Jr.

"What it comes down to is that honesty and fairness are two separate questions," said Gabriel Iglesias, dean of the University of the Philippines college of public administration. "And even at this point, it is clear this is not a fair election."

According to Iglesias and other critics, Marcos' biggest advantage lies in the national election commission itself, a seven-member body that has absolute control over setting up and running the election day machinery, policing the campaign, tabulating the final results and ruling on all election-related disputes.

All members of the commission were handpicked by Marcos. Two of the commissioners are present or former business associates of Marcos' closest advisers, and others are loyal, longtime members of Marcos' New Society Movement political party.

Despite their backgrounds, several commissioners interviewed last week pledged to be impartial in the poll, adding that they were certain that a free and fair election is still possible.

The commission's political slant also came in for sharp criticism last week in a series of hotly contested hearings over an issue that government critics say represents Marcos' second major built-in electoral advantage—access to the nation's powerful mass media.

TV Coverage at Issue

At the heart of the commission's two days of hearings was the way the government-owned television station—the only station in the Philippines capable of broadcasting nationwide—has been covering the election campaign.

Every day that Marcos has been on the campaign trail, the government station, which is funded entirely by the Filipino taxpayers, has devoted hour after hour of air time to showing—and reshowing—Marcos' campaign speeches. Special camera angles have been used to make crowds appear larger and to highlight political signs and placards extolling Marcos' achievements during his 20 years in office.

Yet, government-owned Channel 4 has given little or no air time to Aquino's speeches and rallies, even when she has held them the same day as Marcos and often drew more spectators than did the president's.

Such coverage has been "grossly one-sided" and a "blatant" violation of election-law provisions specifically aimed at making TV stations allot equal air time to both candidates, according to the formal complaint filed by Aquino's attorneys.

"All we ask is that we [Filipinos] be more egalitarian and more democratic," Rene Saguisag, one of Aquino's attorneys, told the commission last week. "Since Mr. Marcos and the ruling party are already so powerful, we ask only that this commission take actions to help someone who started with so many handicaps. Can we not make the contest more sporting?"

Government lawyers representing the station at the hearings conceded that their news accounts were heavily biased in favor of Marcos. They argued only that the equal-time clause does not apply to him because he is the president and, as president, all of his actions are "significant and newsworthy events" exempt under the election rule. Those of Aquino, they added, are not necessarily newsworthy.

The station lawyers rarely spoke during the proceedings, and the bulk of their case was put forth by the election commissioners themselves.

In the end, the commission decided on Thursday not to rule independently in the matter, instead asking the station and Aquino's lawyers to work out a settlement among themselves.

There are still other aspects of the country's political system that Filipino critics use to illustrate what they see as an inherent bias in the upcoming election. Among them are Marcos' economic control over the families of more than 1 million civil servants, many of whom say they have come under concerted pressure from their supervisors in recent weeks to work and vote for Marcos, as well as the president's vast political machine. Local precinct captains have the power to dole out jobs and money in the days before the election.

Noting such built-in inequities, Jose Concepcion, a prominent Filipino businessman who heads a citizens' watchdog group set up to police the polls next month, also suggested that the election "is not going to be fair."

Still, Concepcion, whose National Movement for Free Elections has been accredited by the election commission as the official poll watcher, quickly added, "There is still a chance it can be relatively free and honest."

With a budget of about \$150,000, Concepcion's group plans to enlist the aid of half a million volunteers, 150 donated computers and 15 helicopters to watch the voting at all 90,000 polling places, perform its own independent tally of votes and, thus, preempt any cheating. The organization is officially empowered to monitor all polling places, watch the ballot canvassing and be present when the final tabulations are compiled at the provincial level.

Already, however, the watchdog group has been attacked frequently in the nation's mainstream, pro-government media as a front for opposition and American interests. Marcos' campaign workers have been distributing a pamphlet entitled, "NAMFREL and the CIA—Will 1986 Be a Replay of 1961?"

The pamphlet, labeled black propaganda by Concepcion, alleges that Concepcion's group is connected to a wholly different National Movement for Free Elections that is known to have been an instrument of the CIA in the early 1950s and to have helped elect pro-American President Ramon Magsaysay in 1953. Concepcion vehemently denied the charge last week.

'Nothing to Hide'

And, when asked why the election commission agreed to accredit Concepcion's group to observe the upcoming election, Election Commission Chairman Victorino Saveliano said, "It was just to show that we have nothing to hide." Opinion added, "That's what you Americans wanted, isn't it?"

Whatever, Concepcion's organization, which performed a similar role unofficially in the Philippines' 1984 legislative election, is widely credited for having brought an unprecedented level of credibility to that poll.

More than 70 opposition National Assembly members were elected in the May, 1984, election, and, while Marcos' ruling party won nearly two-thirds of the legislative seats,

the Reagan Administration and the Philippine opposition said Marcos would have won far more were it not for the watchdog group.

Even that election, though, was far from the free, fair and honest process that most Filipinos are hoping for this time.

An exhaustive, two-year study of the 1984 legislative election due to be released next week concludes that, despite the outcome, the contest was, "in short, grossly unfair. . . . The formulated rules of the game were tilted in favor of the candidates of the ruling party."

The nationwide study, a copy of which was obtained by The Times, was done by a team of professors and students at the University of the Philippines. They also concluded last week that a new election code written for the upcoming presidential poll changes few of the inequities and actually adds yet another—a provision that local government officials, most of whom are Marcos loyalists, are now allowed to be present inside polling places.

In addition, the study documented dozens of specific cases to show that the 1984 elections were not only unfair, but often dishonest as well.

From vote-buying, ballot-tampering and fraudulent vote-tallying to harassment of voters that ranged from verbal abuse to murder, the university study recounted examples of a wide range of cheating in nearly all of the Philippines' 73 provinces.

Overall, it classified the results in almost 40% of the 183 races in 1984 as either "questionable" or a "failure."

One such contest, which was singled out by the researchers and by National Movement for Free Elections officials as "the worst of the worst," took place in the province of Antique on the central Philippine island of Panay.

At stake in the election was the political future of one of Marcos' closest advisers, Arturo Pacification, who was running against three opposition candidates, among them Evelio Javier, who had the support of Antique's popular provincial governor.

EXCERPTED